

Lincoln Putting on (H)airs

By

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Abraham Lincoln was the first President of the United States to wear a beard, and in the late months of 1860 and the early months of 1861 practically everybody was talking about this "noble hirsute appendage" which the President-elect had affected. When Lincoln's beard first started to grow, a newspaper reporter with a whimsical sense of humor wrote that "the President was putting on (h)airs."

Those close to Lincoln in the Republican party were quick to point out that bearded men of action were now destined to take over the reigns of government from clean-shaven men who dressed in broadcloth and whose chief attribute was oratory. The opposition press saw "something supremely ridiculous . . . in having a President-elect . . . devote his energies to cultivating whiskers." Nevertheless, beards were becoming popular in the 1860's.

Perhaps there were several good reasons why Lincoln grew a beard while waiting to

assume office. Lincoln had no illusions about his appearance, but no one knows for certain that he grew whiskers to cover up his homeliness. Some claims have been advanced that influential political leaders in the Republican party advised a beard to give the incoming President a look of distinction.

It was eleven year old Grace Bedell of Westfield, New York, who forthrightly broached the subject. She wrote Lincoln, according to original documents in the archives of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, that her father had brought Lincoln's picture home from the fair along with that of Mr. Hamlin (Lincoln's vice-presidential running mate). She discreetly pointed out in her letter that "All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you . . . if you would let your whiskers grow." Grace was convincing. She wrote that "I have got four brothers and part of them will vote for you anyway and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try to get the rest of them to vote for you." She continued that "You would look a great deal better for your face is so thin." Lincoln's eleven year old correspondent assured Lincoln that "My father is going to vote for you" and she wrote that "if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try to get everyone to vote for you that I can."

Lincoln replied to Grace on October 19, 1860 that "As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affection (sic) if I were to begin now?"

Shortly after this correspondence Lincoln

let his whiskers grow and thereby made obsolete all the paintings, lithographs and engravings that had been published and widely circulated during his 1860 presidential campaign. Many people wondered how the beard could have grown so rapidly when they first saw the President-elect on his inaugural tour enroute to Washington, D.C.

To be sure, the whiskers stirred up much ridicule in the contemporary press. Even *Vanity Fair*, March 16, 1861, published a cartoon of a bust of Lincoln with a beard exhibited in an "Agency For The Lincoln Whiskeropherous." The clerk in the cartoon advised his customer to "Try one of these pots, Sir, and in three weeks you will be as hairy and handsome as he is."

However, it was *The New York Illustrated News*, dated March 2, 1861, that made what appears to be the official announcement of Lincoln's beard:

"Now that kings, statesmen, and even handsome priests, whilst preaching of heavenly glories in general, and of their own glories in particular, have adopted the patriarchal fashion of beards and whiskers, as their highest and manliest adornment, there is no wonder that ambitious Americans—desirous of emulating such distinguished company—should cultivate their 'mustaches' and 'whiskeranders'.

"Our good President-elect, 'Honest Old Abe' sets us a brave example in this respect, which all gentlemen, beardless from principle hitherto, would do well to adopt.

'Honest Abe' has cultivated his whiskers and looks as big and handsome now as the best and greatest of his contemporaries. We have the honor of presenting our readers with the first portrait of him taken with his new facial appointments and we hope all patriotic ladies will fall in love with him."

This same newspaper ran a second article entitled, "Hirsute Luxuriance":

"Everyone is talking about the newly-grown whiskers of President Lincoln. It has become the topic of the day. A few weeks ago Mr. Lincoln's cheeks and chin were innocent of anything approaching (a) beard, and looked as though it was impossible to produce on them the noble hirsute appendages of manhood. A young lady in Buffalo (Westfield), who transferred his portrait to her scrapbook accidentally discovered that her political hero presented a much more dignified appearance when whiskers were penciled on his visage; so she wrote him to that effect. He at once, like a sensible man, took the hint, and as time was precious, he resolved to ascertain what hair-producing preparation there was in existence which he could most confidently call on. Accordingly he obtained a large box of a 'stimulating onguent' known as Bellingham's. With this extraordinary paste he soon started the manly adornment which is at present the theme of all classes of society. By adopting this plan Mr. Lincoln has in a few weeks so changed his countenance that all portraits which have been treasured up as representing him have to be

discarded as not any longer likenesses. Mr. Lincoln in doing this is wisely imitating the taste and the practice of all the truly great men of his era. We are as a people very properly returning to the custom of the ancients—to the example of the Apostles and their Gracious Guide—to the fashions of men in the first and innocent ages, as well as to their boast in what are styled the heroic periods. See advertisement on the outside page.”

There is no evidence that Lincoln used Bellingham’s Stimulating Onguent in growing his beard. In all likelihood the advertisement in *The New York Illustrated News* was unauthorized. However, the Horace L. Hege-man Company, the manufacturers of the onguent, made the most of Lincoln’s beard with advertisements in the above newspaper, the *New York Herald* (March 3, 1861) and other news media.

Was Lincoln’s appearance improved? Some people thought the beard implied responsibility like “a sea-captain handling a ship in a storm on a starless night.” Perhaps the whiskers gave Lincoln “a more sober and serene outlook . . . like a serious farmer with crops to look after, or a church sexton in charge of grave affairs.”

Regardless of whether or not the beard improved Lincoln’s appearance, the promoters of Bellingham’s Stimulating Onguent had a Madison Avenue approach to an unlimited market.

17
Woolfield Chateaugue Co.
Oct 16, 1842

Hon A B Lincoln

Dear Sir

My father has just come from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr Kambier's. I am a little just only eleven years old, but want you should be President of the United States very much & I hope you wont think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are. Have you any

little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell the others to me if you cannot answer this letter I have got 4 brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you will let your whisks grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you you would look a great deal better for your face is as thin All the ladies like whisks and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President My father is a going to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I cant try and get every one to vote for you that I can I think that rail fence around your pasture makes it look very pretty I have just got a little baby sister she is three weeks old and is just as cunning as can be When you direct your letter direct to Grace Bidell Woolfield Chateaugue County New York I cannot not write any more now
This letter right off Good bye
Grace Bidell

Left. An eleven year old girl, Grace Bedell, sent this letter to Mr. Lincoln suggesting that he grow a beard. Below. Mr. Lincoln's reply.

Private

Springfield, Ill Oct 19, 1860
Miss Grace Bedell

My dear little Miss.

Your very agreeable letter
of the 15th is received—

I regret the necessity of saying I
have no daughter— I have three
sons— one seventeen, one nine, and
one seven, years of age— They, with
their Mother, constitute my whole fam-
ily—

As to the whiskers, having none now
any, do you not think people would
call it a piece of very affectation
if I were to begin it now?

Your very sincere well-wisher
A. Lincoln

THE **Lincoln**
NATIONAL **Life** INSURANCE COMPANY